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RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 0039
RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA 0011
RUEHWL/AMEMBASSY WELLINGTON 0009
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 CHIANG MAI 000043

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DEPARTMENT FOR EAP/MLS, DRL, AND IO
PACOM FOR FPA

E.O. 12958: DECL: 3/11/2018

TAGS: PHUM KDEM BM TH

SUBJECT: ETHNIC GROUPS TO OPPOSE REFERENDUM, CONDUCT EXIT POLL

REF: RANGOON 181

CHIANG MAI 00000043 001.2 OF 003

CLASSIFIED BY: Alex Barrasso, Chief, Pol/Econ, CG Chiang Mai.
REASON: 1.4 (d)

Summary

¶1. (C) Ethnic exile groups based in Thailand are encouraging their contacts inside Burma to reject the draft Constitution in the upcoming referendum. Though they have next to no funding available, they are organizing ethnic youth, ceasefire, and other political groups in Burma's seven ethnic states, and they plan to conduct exit polls on voting day. Separately, they are striving for better coordination among exile groups, including exchanging information about different networks inside Burma, and consulting on political strategies in an effort to overcome some of the divisiveness that has long plagued these groups. They claim to be coordinating with 88 Generation members, and may warrant future consideration of USG financial support. End Summary.

Say No and Tell the World

¶2. (C) Burmese ethnic exile groups based in the region are gearing up to oppose the upcoming constitutional referendum, according to Lian Sakhong, Secretary General of the Ethnic Nationalities Council (an umbrella organization of ethnic exile groups). They realize that they cannot conduct a high-profile public campaign opposing the draft constitution, so they are working with contacts inside Burma to encourage a "no" vote by word of mouth, he told us in a March 11 meeting. This effort is focused on four groups of actors inside the country: members of the 88 Generation in ethnic areas; the Ethnic Youth Nationalities Group and other ethnic youth groups; ceasefire

groups in ethnic areas; and the United Nationalities Alliance (a grouping of ethnic-based political parties).

¶13. (C) The main focus of this effort, Lian Sakhong told us, is plans to bus voters to polling stations and conduct exit polls. (Note: Having been arrested three times and tortured prior to fleeing Burma, Lian Sakhong is well aware of the risks involved.) The ENC already has digital mapping software, he said, plans to enter its exit polling results into the program, and make the data public as soon as it is available. The ENC is in consultation with the Forum for Democracy in Burma (FDB) about extending this effort to include Burma's seven divisions, rather than limit it only to the ethnic states.

¶14. (C) When we pointed out that the Ethnic Nationalities Youth Group (EYNG), despite its connections inside Burma, appears not to be well-funded, Lian Sakhong agreed, stating that he provides them whatever funds he can via the ENC. Specifically, he mentioned \$3,000 donated to the ENC by the Danish Burma Committee last September, part of which was used to buy digital and video cameras that were subsequently taken across the border by the EYNG. Currently, however, he said the ENC only has five cameras remaining inside Burma. Additional funding would support travel inside Burma to encourage people to vote against the constitution, and would be used to purchase more cameras to document abuses on voting day. Lian Sakhong admitted that the exit polling would be far from comprehensive. We just can't cover all the townships, he said, but we can be stationed in several in each ethnic state, and with the help of the FDB, in the divisions as well.

How Will the Regime React?

¶15. (C) Lian Sakhong admitted the regime is not going to idly sit back and allow exit polling. He opined the regime will employ several different tactics to stop it, and ensure the

CHIANG MAI 00000043 002.2 OF 003

referendum is approved. Notable among these is the fact that the regime has co-opted leaders in ethnic areas who are trusted by the general population,. Some of them are even participating on the Referendum Convening Commission, he added. When we asked for specific names, he mentioned Tun Aung Chain, Sai Tun Myint, Sai Yee Tip, and Hmu Htang. These leaders, he opined, are well-placed to convincingly urge voters to support the constitution. Citing a source in a Mon ceasefire group who lives in Rangoon, he also said the ruling generals have already ordered regional commanders to use force if necessary to ensure voting goes according to plan. If the vote is hijacked, he opined, the result may very well be another mass uprising.

Overcoming Divisions

¶16. (C) Lian Sakhong told us he is trying to revive and strengthen the Strategic Consultative Committee (SCC), which, although in existence since 2001, has not played a significant role in the exile movement. As currently constituted, the SCC serves as a forum for ethnic groups represented by the ENC, the NCUB (National Council of the Union of Burma - an umbrella organization of Burmese political exile groups), the NCGUB (National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma - the self-proclaimed government in exile), the Student Youth Congress of Burma, the Women's League of Burma, and the Forum for Democracy in Burma to meet, exchange ideas, and discuss political strategy.

¶17. (C) Since the SCC is the most broad-based representation of ethnic and Burman groups, Lian Sakhong is attempting to push it into a more coordinating role among exile groups, and give it the power to make political decisions. The constituent organizations are also sharing information about their networks inside Burma, and Lian Sakhong envisions the SCC eventually

speaking for the exile community with a more united voice. He said that after the protests and crackdown last August-September, the SCC felt it needed to be prepared to coordinate the actions of its members. The group has also agreed to apply collectively for funding, he added, to avoid its member organizations competing against each other for limited resources. Furthermore, the SCC's member groups complement each other, Lian Sakhong opined. The ENC has more links in Burma's ethnic states, while the FDB, NCUB, and NCGUB are better connected in urban areas, he asserted.

¶8. (C) Lian Sakhong recognizes the challenges ahead, particularly given that the NCUB participates in the SCC. He summarized for us disagreements he had previously had with NCUB General Secretary Maung Maung regarding the draft constitution produced by exile groups. Maung Maung, he said, tried to use the document to seek support for the formation of a "shadow, parallel" Burmese Government in exile. Lian Sakhong, on the other hand, views the constitution as a valuable tool that could serve as a model for Burma's future leaders to work from as they draft their own charter. Forming a government in exile based on the draft constitution would automatically annul the results of the 1990 elections, Lian Sakhong noted. While Maung Maung sees the draft as Burma's future constitution, Lian Sakhong views it as an alternative to the regime's draft, which the Burmese people should be able to openly discuss along side the regime's.

Comments

¶9. (C) We are encouraged that elements of the plans Lian Sakhong outlined to us track very closely with those of the 88 Generation detailed in Ref A: both groups are using word of mouth as the main means of communicating the "vote no" message; both need funds for travel to deliver the message; and both have requested funds for cameras and other equipment that would be used to document abuses on voting day. Embassy Rangoon will work to assess the ENC's coordination with 88 Generation,

CHIANG MAI 00000043 003.2 OF 003

ceasefire groups, and youth groups inside Burma. We have asked the ENC to submit a detailed proposal, which we will share with Embassies Rangoon and Bangkok before determining if the ENC's efforts warrant consideration of USG funding.

¶10. Embassy Rangoon notes that busing activists to polling stations on election day sounds very unrealistic, given the enhanced security environment throughout the country that is likely to increase as referendum day draws closer. Additionally, EYNG is well-known to Embassy Rangoon. They are a very small, nascent, disorganized group, without the numbers needed to conduct a wide-spread campaign. Rangoon poloffs met with them several times after September. Their members repeatedly demanded USG funding for "democracy promotion" programs they could never describe. Many of them fled to Thailand or were arrested shortly after. Their link to 88 Generation is tenuous at best.

¶11. (C) The ENC's efforts to unite exile groups are a breath of fresh air. Personal differences among key exile figures and mutual distrust have plagued the exile community since 1988. Though the ENC cannot by itself unite all the groups, any effort to bring several of them together in a consultative mechanism that has the capacity to control the actions of its member organizations is a welcome start.

¶12. (U) This cable was coordinated with Embassies Rangoon and Bangkok.
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